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MEMORANDUM

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Thomas M. Broderick DOCKETED

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Utilities Division

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DATE:

June 17, 2016

DOCKETED BY

RE:

STAFF COMMENTS TO THE PROPOSED WATER POLICY STATEMENTS

FILED IN DOCKET NO. W-00000C-16-0151

The Utilities Division ("Staff") hereby provides comments to the proposed water policy statements filed in Docket No. W-00000C-16-0151 on May 13, 2016 and May 20, 2016. Staff is committed to reviewing and evaluating existing processes and seeking solutions that will result in streamlining of those process.

Overall, Staff supports efforts to encourage water conservation, to minimize customer rate impacts, and to ensure financial stability for public service corporations. Staff also strongly supports efforts to reduce the number of small, struggling water companies. In general, the proposed policy statements are designed to work toward those objectives. Nonetheless, Staff has some concerns with the proposals, and respectfully requests that the Commission proceed with caution in order to avoid unintended consequences.

These comments will begin with a discussion of general concerns that are likely to apply across all of the proposals, and then will address some of the proposals individually.

I. General Comments

Some of the wording in the proposed policy statements may constrain the Commission in the discharge of its duties. Often, words of absolute commitment, such as "will" or "shall," appear instead of broader language, such as "may" or "should." Some of the language may not be consistent with the nature of a policy statement. Policy statements are intended to provide guidance and inform Staff and other stakeholders of the Commission's general preferences.

Staff is also concerned that some of the language may create unreasonable expectations or place unintended limits on the Commission's authority. Water utilities may view policy statements that contain definite language as creating a right or an entitlement. A policy statement, however, is not the appropriate vehicle for creating binding rules of general applicability. Because these proposals take the form of policy statements, Staff suggests that the words "shall" and "will" should generally be changed to "may" or "may decide to," or similar permissive wording.

Another concern is scope of certain proposed policies that include Class C water companies. The Commission recently revised its rules regarding utility classifications which resulted in the reclassification of utilities that used to be Class C to Class D, and Classed D to Class E. Staff believes Arizona Corporation Commission – Generic Investigation Docket No. W-00000C-16-0151 Page 2

that policies adopted by the Commission at this time should focus on Class D and Class E companies where efforts to support troubled water companies is the most needed.

Staff understands that many of these proposals are intended to address the problems experienced by small, struggling water companies, and Staff agrees that those are urgent, worthwhile and important objectives.

II. Rate Design

Staff believes that a well-structured rate design will promote revenue stability. Rate designs that recover a larger percentage of the revenue requirement through the monthly minimum and the first tier of the commodity rate may be beneficial because they are likely to result in a more stable and predictable stream of monthly cash flows to the underlying utility. However, the proposed shift in the rate structure may adversely impact low volume customers. Staff recommends that some analysis should be undertaken in order to understand the impacts on low volume customers.

III. Materiality

One of the filings directs Staff to develop "standards of materiality" for audits and to focus audits "on issues likely to materially impact rates." Staff supports the goal of conducting audits in an efficient and reasonable manner. However, Staff is concerned that specific restrictions may limit the efficacy of Staff's audits.

Staff currently has auditing guidelines that address the issue of materiality from both a rate base and operating expense perspective. Generally, for small water companies, Staff considers the materiality threshold for adjustments to be one percent of rate base. Where a utility has a small or negative rate base the one percent guide cannot be applied and other factors will need to be considered. Staff applies these guidelines on a case-by-case basis, as the materiality of any specific inquiry may vary with the facts. Even though two or more individual operating expense adjustments may "net out" to an immaterial total, the individual adjustments themselves may be significant. In addition, it is important to capture synchronizing adjustments that might be considered immaterial if viewed in isolation, but that need to be made to accompany the larger adjustment. For example, a clearly material adjustment to salaries expense will generally carry with it a much smaller adjustment related to payroll tax expense liability, but both adjustments should be recognized.

A certain amount of flexibility is helpful in the audit process, and Staff urges the Commission to acknowledge that in these policies.

¹ Commr. Little's Proposed Amendment No. 1 (May 19, 2016).

IV. WRAM

In the proposed policy statement concerning conservation adjustments, the Working Group proposes the adoption of a Water Rate Adjustment Mechanism ("WRAM"). This mechanism is intended to provide for "a true-up of authorized revenues to collected revenues" in order to "adjust rates prospectively to assure that a water utility" collects its authorized revenue. Although it is not specifically labeled as such, this mechanism would appear to be equivalent to full decoupling. Staff would note that the Commission has entertained decoupling proposals in recent energy rate cases. In those proceedings, some stakeholders—especially certain customer groups—have opposed decoupling.² Staff believes that there may be other mechanisms to address this issue. Staff believes that the Commission should direct Staff to work with the stakeholders to explore options.

V. Consolidation

Staff believes that reducing the number of small, distressed water systems has substantial merit, and Staff supports efforts to achieve that goal. Furthermore, Staff believes that the proposed draft policies provide a useful starting point for the Commission.

Although portions of the proposed policies appear to be limited to acquisitions of nonviable companies, other sections appear to apply to all acquisitions of private water systems. For example, page 25 of the proposal states that the acquired system must have less than 3,300 customer connections and must be nonviable in order for the acquirer to qualify for an acquisition incentive.³ By contrast, the three options at the end of this same proposal appear to contemplate the award of acquisition premiums for any acquisition of a private water system.⁴ Staff believes that acquisition premiums may be appropriate in situations in which a nonviable system is acquired by a viable system.

However, because of Arizona's constitutional requirements, some of the proposed incentives may not be appropriate for water utilities in Arizona. Staff recommends that the Commission direct Staff and the stakeholders to review the Pennsylvania policy and other similarly situated jurisdictions, such as Oregon, New Mexico and California and propose a recommendation on the consolidation incentives. The recommendations may include acquisition adjustments for non-viable and viable water systems.

In addition, Staff believes that the thorough review of the proposed recommendation of acquisition adjustments/premiums for every transaction should be undertaken to ensure that the proposed transaction will result in just and reasonable rates that are fair to both the ratepayer and the stakeholders.

In conclusion, Staff believes that acquisition adjustments can be a useful tool for incenting the acquisition of non-viable systems.

² See, e.g., Southwest Gas Corp., Docket No. G-01551A-10-0458, Decision No. 72723.

³ Working Group's Proposals at 25.

⁴ Working Group's Proposals at 32-37.

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The issues surrounding how best to structure incentives for consolidation tend to be complex. The Water Working Group's proposed policy statements include at least three separate proposals related to industry consolidation: 1) Consolidating the Arizona Water Industry, 2) Regional Consolidation, and 3) Water Utility Acquisition Process. Staff views these three proposals as interrelated. Because of the length of these proposals, and because of their inter-relationship, these three proposals would benefit from a rulemaking proceeding in which the Commission and stakeholders can work together to develop a comprehensive regulatory scheme to encourage water industry consolidation.

VI. Cost of Capital

Staff believes that the development and adoption of a simplified and/or generic approach to determining the return on equity ("ROE") has merit. Other jurisdictions, such as California and Florida, have adopted a generic approach. Staff would recommend that the Commission direct Staff and the stakeholders establish a generic ROE approach. Certain Arizona-specific ratemaking doctrines, such as the fair value requirement, may need to be considered to ensure that any process that is developed conforms to those requirements.

VII. Including Wastewater

The proposed policies are applicable to both water and wastewater companies. Staff notes that there are relatively few wastewater public service corporations in Arizona, and the issues that those companies face may be different. It may be more appropriate to address policies related to wastewater companies in a separate docket.

VIII. Conclusion

Staff appreciates the opportunity to offer these comments, and looks forward to the ongoing development of these important policies. Staff also notes that after reviewing the forthcoming filings in the docket, it may seek to supplement its comments.

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